

## Christ, Communion, and the Future

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The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
World Communion Sunday  
Reception of a New Member  
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“Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” – Philippians 3:13-14

Communion is a funny thing. None of us understands it, and yet we all do it. Well, most of us do, anyway, if we call ourselves Christian. Most Christians do two things regularly: they baptize and they celebrate communion. How they baptize and how they celebrate they don't agree on, and why they baptize and why they celebrate they don't agree on, either. But baptize and celebrate we do because Jesus told us to. Baptism and communion are acts of obedience, and when we ignore so much else that Jesus told us to do – “Go, sell all that you have, and then come and follow me,” for instance – it's nice to have a little obedience to hold on to. Most of us, sadly, prefer the wafer to the cross.

World Communion Sunday began among Presbyterians in 1933. The pastor of Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh felt that Christians ought to be able to come together once a year to celebrate one of the two sacraments that most of us recognize. A few of Shadyside's neighboring churches responded that first year, and a few more over the next couple of years, and then in 1936 the Presbyterian denomination began promoting it, and by 1940, the National Council of Churches endorsed it. Today, several Protestant denominations recognize World Communion Sunday, but we're still a long way away from celebrating communion with our Catholic and Orthodox siblings, and some of our Lutheran siblings. The body of Christ remains broken, and not in a good way.

And Jesus certainly knew that when he looked around the table at his disciples for the last time in his pre-resurrection life and said, “This is my body broken for you.” He may have taken a loaf of bread when he said those words, but he was almost certainly looking at his followers when he said them. The Christian church, which always reflects its context, is broken just as our culture is broken. We may not be as polarized, as vocal, or as toxic as our politics have become, but we are far from healthy, and who knows when God will restore us, as we prayed for in our opening psalm.

But baby steps matter; no one runs a marathon who didn't start out by taking baby steps, and every generation enters the world as helpless as a newborn. We observe World Communion Sunday here at Faith to remind ourselves to keep taking those baby steps that draw us closer to one another, closer to God, closer to creation, and closer to our true selves. When we come to the table of which Christ is both the feast and the host, we draw nearer to

what it means to be the son or daughter of God and what it means to be a human one, as Jesus called himself. In a single gesture, we see ourselves for who we are and for who we are not yet.

“Beloved,” Paul wrote to the Philippians, “this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and striving forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (3:13-14).

World Communion Sunday – or any communion Sunday – isn’t about our theological agreements or disagreements. Our communion isn’t about us, it’s about Christ and our calling to be his followers. To the extent that we are one, we are one in him, not in whatever shared thinking, talking, and doing we can muster. This communion table, even before we have done anything with it, tells a story that says very little about us and says a very great deal about God. It’s a story about divine and human love and the sacrifices that such loves demand. Love always demands sacrifice – of time, of resources, of life itself – and those unwilling to make those sacrifices are unwilling to follow the One whose table this is. Those unwilling to make such sacrifices eat and drink here unworthily.

Paul confessed to the Philippians that he had not yet reached the goal of God’s call to him in Christ Jesus, and all of us would to admit the same. We know we are not the people God has created us to be. We remain captive to our appetites, our fears, and our egos. Our failures in love and courage are manifest in our broken relationships with God, with God’s creation, with God’s children, and even with our own divided selves.

And so, to save us from the secular indifference of our age on the one hand, and from an overwhelming despair on the other, God has provided us with a table of invitation, welcome, and aspiration. We celebrate communion to celebrate God’s faithfulness to us and to all creation, and to signify our own aspirations to be more than we are now. We keep pressing on toward the goal of our calling, refreshed and renewed by our gathering at this table. We know we are not yet where God wants us to be, but each step we take toward this table and what it represents – here in the sanctuary or wherever we are celebrating – we know is a step in the right direction. Thanks be to God.